

Shevardnadze Backs 'Honest Dia'

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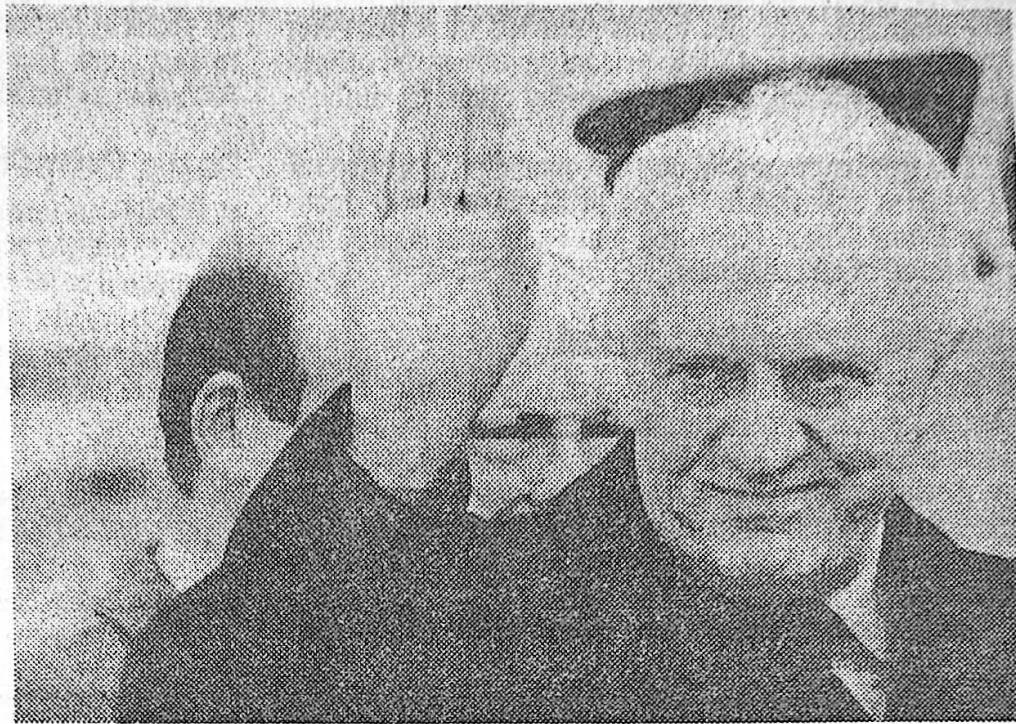
Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, arriving here for three days of top-level talks, said yesterday the Kremlin hopes "honest dialogue" with Lithuanian leaders will solve its crisis with the breakaway republic.

As Shevardnadze arrived at Andrews Air Force Base after a flight from Moscow, the House moved toward passage of a measure calling on the Bush administration to swallow its concern about the Soviet reaction and recognize Lithuania as an independent country.

The House resolution, approved by leaders of the Foreign Affairs Committee and awaiting floor action, urges President Bush to take steps "at the earliest possible time" to normalize relations with Lithuania. The United States has never accepted the incorporation of Lithuania or the other Baltic states into the Soviet Union 50 years ago but so far has declined to accord full diplomatic status to Lithuania, which formally declared its independence of the Soviet Union March 11.

The Lithuanian issue is a major uncertainty affecting this week's round of U.S.-Soviet talks, which will cover arms control, regional conflicts and many other matters in preparation for a full-scale summit meeting of President Bush and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev here this June. U.S. officials said they hope Shevardnadze will be empowered to fix the final dates for the summit during his current visit.

The touchy Lithuanian issue will be "at the top of the agenda" for



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Foreign Minister Shevardnadze waves to press at Andrews Air Force Base.

Secretary of State James A. Baker III in his first meeting with Shevardnadze at the State Department this afternoon, according to spokesman Margaret Tutwiler. The U.S. and Soviet positions on Afghanistan, Angola and pending arms control negotiations are also likely to come up in the initial session, Tutwiler said.

Bush, who sent a personal message to Gorbachev last Thursday about the Lithuanian issue, told reporters he is hoping to learn "how that message went down in Moscow" when he sees Shevardnadze at the White House Friday. On a campaign fund-raising trip to the Midwest, Bush reiterated his hope "to see this matter handled in a cool fashion—freedom, democracy and self-determination all goes forward, but where it's handled in a way [that] the result is peaceful and no use of force."

The American public, at this point, generally approves of Bush's cautious approach to the Lithuanian issue but is sharply divided about whether the United States should accord official recognition to Lithuania, according to a new Washington Post-ABC News poll.

The telephone survey of 1,000 randomly selected adults, interviewed between March 28 and April 1, reported that 53 percent

'Dialogue' to Solve Lithuania Crisis

believe Bush is handling the situation just about right, while 29 percent said he is not tough enough. Those polled divided almost equally—41 percent in favor and 42 percent opposed—on fully recognizing Lithuania, “even if it would hurt United States relations with the Soviet Union.”

The survey, which is subject to a sampling error of plus or minus three percentage points, suggested that the war of nerves between the Soviet Union and Lithuania has done little to change positive public attitudes toward Gorbachev. Nor has the Lithuanian situation dramatically changed American views on negotiating further arms control agreements with the Soviets.

The poll also found that about four out of 10 Americans believe Gorbachev is losing power in the Soviet Union, while an equal share of those interviewed said Gorbachev is gaining power. The remainder were undecided.

Shevardnadze, in a statement to reporters on arrival, said “a great deal of work, very creatively, is underway in all areas” to prepare for the June summit. He seemed to go out of his way to speak of the possibility of speeding up work on a treaty slashing conventional armed forces in Europe and paving the

way for “major breakthroughs” at the summit on U.S.-Soviet economic ties, trade, science and technology.

Questioned about Lithuania, Shevardnadze began his answer by saying that this is “an internal matter” for the Soviet Union, which will do “whatever we think is necessary.” He went on to say he appreciates the concern that Americans express about the future of Lithuania. “We are going to act within the framework of our constitution,” said Shevardnadze, echoing the position taken in Moscow.

He added, “Our main weapon in resolving any issue, both domestically and also in our relations with other countries, is dialogue. Honest dialogue. And this is the dialogue that we are looking forward to with the Lithuanian people and the Lithuanian leadership.”

Earlier, Lithuania’s chief diplomat in Washington, Stasys Lozoraitis Jr., told reporters he is less optimistic about the situation in recent days “because I don’t understand Mr. Gorbachev . . . I think he is acting like a man with the mentality of the 19th century. You can’t deal with the Lithuanian people this way. You can’t solve any problems with paratroopers and armored cars.”

Lozoraitis declared that Lithuania is “ready to negotiate at any moment” on any issue with the sole exception of the nation’s independence, which he described as non-negotiable.

In a related move, a Soviet Foreign Ministry official expressed hope the two sides can resolve their remaining disputes on cruise missile limitations in a new strategic weapons treaty. He said Shevardnadze will press for a U.S. commitment both to halt production of chemical weapons and to eliminate existing chemical weapons without precondition under a multilateral treaty.

The official also said Moscow remains interested in an overall ceiling on troops in Europe under a new conventional forces treaty, a provision Washington and its allies have repeatedly rejected.

In addition, Moscow prefers to postpone negotiation of a potential ban on U.S. and Soviet mobile land-based missiles with multiple warheads until after completion of a new strategic forces agreement, he said.

Staff writers Richard Morin and R. Jeffrey Smith contributed to this report.